

The Tackle Boxⁱ

by Richard W. Arms

I didn't even know where it came from at first. I was finally getting around to cleaning out some shelves in the far corner of the garage. I had put it off for years, but I needed the space, and the old boxes of financial records needed to be shredded in order to make room for newer versions of the same sort of things; those things that you feel you need to keep but that you will actually never look at again. So on rare occasions you get rid of the oldest and least important. That was what I was finally doing when I came across the old tackle box. It was back behind the boxes, hidden from view these many years. I looked at it in wonderment and puzzlement. It had a familiar appearance but I knew it had never been mine. Fishermen know their equipment intimately, and make choices that reflect their preferences. I had never used that tackle box and I never would have bought it. It was too big, too heavy, too old-fashioned. Yet there was something familiar about it.

Pleasantly using it as a diversion from my chore I took it off the shelf and carried it across to my workbench. It was made of steel, once painted dark green but now largely just a rusty brown that left dusty smears on my jeans. A clasp at the top, under the handle that had probably once been covered with leather but was now just metal, held the two sections of the domed top together. I could see that if I could lift the front of the clasp and undo the fastener the two sections of the top would swing out, revealing the interior of the tackle box. But the thick rust had solidified it to a mass of reddish brown. Finally with screwdriver, wire brush and pliers, I was able to pry it open and then wedge the two halves of the lid apart. Suddenly, out of the box burst a flood of odors, and with them a wave of memories, and I knew immediately what it was.

What first assaulted me was not what I saw but what I smelled. It was the smell of "bug juice": citronella. And also, more subtle, the smell of pipe tobacco. It was the dusty smell bridging a gap of many years before, yet it brought back a deluge of memories. It was the smell of fishing camps in the woods, and the smell of wood smoke from a fireplace. I may not have really smelled it but I thought I detected Scotch whisky, and burned hotdogs and maybe even grilled steaks. It was the aroma of wet woolen sweaters and rubber boots drying in a corner. Here I had again found Harry. It was not the Harry of the Country Club or the Harry of the Cadillacs, which were all he would condescend to drive. It was the other Harry. It was the Harry when he became what I imagined he wished he was.

I didn't need to even open the box further to know what I would find, but I did manage to pry the lids up. It was as I anticipated. There were three salmon fly fishing reels, manual of course. Harry would never have used an automatic reel. There were boxes of streamer flies and a number of prepared leaders. I saw extra fly lines, line dressing, reel oil in a metal tube and a hook sharpener. Looking further I encountered the inevitable pouch of pipe tobacco, and even a package of pipe cleaners. A pair of pliers too rusted to open and a pocketknife in similar condition. There was little order to the arrangement of the contents. Here Harry was able to allow disorder, because this was the other Harry.

This tackle box was from another era, a time before I had married Harry's daughter. In later years I fished with Harry, but I knew it was not the same as his Maine fishing trips with "the boys" as he referred to them. Yet I thought I got to know Harry so well in the next forty years that I could feel what that box had meant to him. We fished in Mexico and fished in Colorado, we fished the tidewaters in Maine and the coves on Cape Cod. We fished for trout in New Mexico and Mackerel in the Damariscotta River and yellowtail in the Gulf of California. But the Salmon fishing at Rangeley Lake was before my time and it was something special that he only obliquely referenced from time to time. Yet here, in this tackle box, I sensed that I had opened again a very special part of Harry's life, and that I could at least in a small part recall what I had come to understand of Harry because of it.

There is something about fishing that brings out the underlying genuineness of a person, I believe. Perhaps it is a primitive and instinctive thing, wherein the hunter or the fisherman in early times when occupied in these tasks was only concerned with his own preservation and needy of self-reliance. I know that no amount of money, influence, position of importance, worldly accomplishments, or even piety can influence whether that fish is going to gobble a worm or rise to a fly. A trout does not care whether you are wearing blue jeans or a tuxedo. The Striped Bass or Bluefish does not care if you are in a canoe or a yacht. Beautiful people don't catch more fish than ugly ones. The indifference of the quarry makes us abandon our posturing and pretexts. Or so it seemed with Harry.

Harry was a success. Harry was moderately wealthy. Not rich, but well off enough to do what he wanted to in his spare time. And what Harry wanted to do in his spare time was go fishing. Not catch fish, although that added to the pleasure, but just go fishing. And, moreover, although he would condescend in later years to fish any small lake or large bay, his real love was to go fishing in such a way that it became a ritual. To Harry, who had a disdain for organized religion, perhaps because of a religious upbringing, fishing brought back that participation in a liturgy. He who had once been an altar boy now served at the altar of Isaac Walton. And that ritualistic fishing entailed going with a group of men who also worshiped at the same altar. There were very well delineated parameters in a men's fishing camp. They

entailed not only actually fishing, but included plaid woolen shirts, chest waders, grilled steaks, moderate drinking, pipe smoking and, most of all the green tackle box. The fishing rod had to be split bamboo in those days, and preferably made in England or Scotland of Tonkin cane. You tied your own flies in the winter, and had a couple of boxes of them ready to go. Only fishing bought out these factors that I came to believe were the real Harry. And the smells and sights from that tackle box encompassed what I thought of as the real Harry, that I had come to know and respect.

I too in later years had participated in similar rituals. In Alaska, fishing for halibut and Salmon off Prince of Wales Island I had experienced the same bonding of fishermen. All the others at the lodge were from very prosaic lives, as was I, I am sure. But there was no discussion of families, or jobs of educations or careers of aspirations. We were fishermen, joined together in the primitive ritual of seeking to outwit fish. That other life was out of bounds. We discussed the waters and the baits and the weather, and the outlook for the next day. We spoke of the talent or lack of talent of the skippers of the boats we were fishing from. We boasted of big ones caught and bemoaned even bigger ones lost.

Such, I envisioned, had to have been the atmosphere at that remote fishing camp in Maine, many years before I had even met Harry. "The Boys" were, like Harry, businessmen. But they were there to fish. I wondered if maybe Harry clung to this group with its illusion of remoteness and independence. The masculine bonding would have appealed to him. Harry's success in that other world he was escaping from, although undoubtedly well earned, had come from taking over and becoming president of a company his father had founded. I wondered if he might have felt a little apologetic that his success might be questioned for that reason. Certainly the ground rules of the fishing camp allowed him to put those feelings aside. I am sure he did not mention his family and his wealth just as the others did not. Yes, this tackle box told a very interesting story about a man I had come to think I had understood. So now, years later, I was standing at my workbench in my garage, smelling and feeling the contents of his tackle box, and remembering my father in law, now gone a number of years. I was sure that I understood this man. He had gone off on his fishing trips with "The Boys" and become, I believed, the underlying person who he really was, separated from the cares he left behind.

Thinking these thoughts, I was looking down into the scattered debris in the box. I noticed a small metal can that had once held some sort of lozenges, perhaps cough drops, since Harry was always prepared for any medical emergency. It was at the bottom of the box, covered by, and seemingly hidden by, two boxes of flies. I lifted it out of the tackle box and shaking it heard something rustling inside. No doubt a lure or some flies I thought, but the lid was rusted closed. No amount of twisting or banging would let me pry off the cover. Were these, I

wondered, his special flies; his secret weapons? Did he hide them at the bottom of the tackle box to keep them from the curious eyes of his companions; "The Boys"? It seemed a secret I wanted to understand.

There is little that can withstand the combination of WD-40 and a large pair of vise grips. It took a while but I finally was able to twist the metal cover and break it loose from its coating of rust. Lifting it up and peering into the can there was little to see except a dim grey rectangle of heavy paper. I reached in and carefully brought it out. Under it was a small lock of hair, tied with a faded pale blue ribbon. Lifting the paper to the light I realized it was a small faded photograph. It was of a young girl, perhaps ten years old, with brown hair that seemed to match the color of the wisp with the ribbon. I suddenly realized that this was a picture of the little girl who would one day become my wife.



The author on fishing trip in Alaska, 1956.

¹ From *The Tackle Box: Stories About People Who Fish* by Richard W. Arms (Belfort & Bastion, December 19, 2015), ISBN 978-06926602638. Reprinted with permission of the family.